

IN STEP WITH INDIANA AUTHORS...
FEATURING AN INTERVIEW WITH
TONY PERONA

by Elizabeth Wright



After seeing the photos of Tony Perona at his website, tonyperona.com, which I perused in preparation for this interview, I wondered which man I would be meeting. Would it be the clean-cut businessman in a conservative suit, or the mysterious sword-wielding man with the wry grin who came through the door at Starbucks that afternoon? It was neither. The Tony Perona I had the pleasure of meeting drove up in a minivan and bounded through the door with a warm, friendly smile. He looked like any active dad out running errands in suburban Indianapolis on the weekend and, in fact, was fresh off the slopes from skiing the previous day with his church group.

Tony has been a freelance writer for local newspapers and businesses since he left a career in marketing and public relations at General Motors in 1991 to be a stay-at-home dad. His first novel, *Second Advent*, came out in 2002 followed by a second novel, *Angels Whisper*, in 2005. Both mystery novels feature Nick Bertetto, an amateur detective from Franklin, Indiana, who, not coincidentally, is a stay-at-home dad as well. The third novel in the Bertetto series, *Saintly Remains*, was sent to his agent this past March.

I asked Tony how he got started writing and found out that it was something he loved from an early age, although he didn't consciously pursue it as a career for quite some time. He received his undergraduate degree

in engineering but soon realized it wasn't for him. Instead, he began an MBA program in marketing and advertising at the University of Chicago where his writing skills became more honed. In addition to the many writing assignments of the program, Tony indulged his creative abilities by writing for the annual "Follies" put on by the School of Business. He credits these fun, but quite challenging and

involved writing ventures, with making the notion of a successful long writing project a reality for him, although it would still be some time before this came to fruition.

While working at a division of General Motors over the next 10 years, Tony wrote extensively in his job and discovered he could write and make a living at it. When his wife, Debbie, wanted to go back to work after being a stay-at-home mom with their two young children for many years, they decided that Tony would become the stay-at-home parent, still a rare arrangement in 1991. This switch in career paths also gave Tony the opportunity to explore putting out his shingle and begin doing freelance writing in the evenings. Like his protagonist, Nick Bertetto, Tony had to juggle childcare with his freelance work, occasionally taking his daughters with him on an interview for a newspaper story. As his children got older, Tony found more time to devote to the notion of a "long writing project" in the form of a mystery novel.

Tony explained that he was drawn to the mystery genre because mysteries presented the challenge of solving a puzzle. Traditional mysteries, such as Agatha Christie novels, were among the first books he had read and he enjoyed trying to figure out who did it before the detective did. His own process for writing mystery novels is quite methodical, always starting with a well-organized, chapter by chapter outline. "I think that's the latent engineer in me," Perona laughed. In preparing for his first novel, Tony studied the layout of other mystery novels, from how the plots tended to unfold to the average number of words in a chapter. This helped cut what appeared to be an overwhelming task down to size and allowed Tony to



approach writing his novel manageably, chapter by chapter. Both of his books follow an outline of 28 chapters plus an epilogue.

Although Tony is having success with his novels now, this wasn't always the case. His first attempt at a novel was "very bad" but taught him a great deal about writing. "I've learned a couple of things," he said. At the top of that list is perseverance, which is indeed illustrated by the fact that it was eight years between the first draft of *Second Advent* and its publication in 2002. Tony went through five full drafts of the novel during that time. He said writing is a difficult business to break into. It requires a writer to listen to the opinions of those he respects and to be prepared to make valid changes to his work. Tony pointed out that J.A. Konrath, author of the Lt. Jack Daniels series, wrote on the order of 10 complete novels before he got his first contract.

Which leads to the second crucial lesson that Tony learned: "It's a business." This was something he didn't fully discover until the elation of the first book wore off and he was engaged in the hard work of promoting its sale. "People don't realize what goes into it. If you don't treat it like a business, you may not get a second book." From publishers to distributors, bookstores, libraries, and of course, readers, the writer has many customers to reach. Tony keeps himself busily engaged with each of these constituencies. He regularly gives book talks at libraries and other venues and has held several signings at bookstores throughout the Midwest. In April 2006, Tony will be appearing at the *Malice Domestic* mystery convention in Washington, D.C.

Book talks at libraries seemed to be a particular favorite for Tony so I asked him what his experience has been with libraries. He told me his parents regularly took him to the library as a child where he "just devoured books." Tony characterizes his family as big readers where his wife, Debbie, is an even bigger reader than he is. He gave special mention to the local Plainfield Public Library's active programming, especially for children, and the fact that "the librarians are wonderfully supportive of my work."

While attitudes toward stay-at-home dads have changed over time, it was certainly challenging at first when people would occasionally make jokes, asking him what he got for Mother's Day. However, Tony says it was absolutely the right decision for him and his family. In addition to a successful writing career, Tony explained that he and his wife have two great kids, a comfortable life where they have the things they need, and they're both "really happy. To me that's huge, that's it right there," Perona beamed. It's a puzzle he's clearly solved.

Tony Perona is an entertaining guest author who is available for appearances at libraries, bookstores, schools, etc. To learn more about Tony, his writing and his appearances, please see www.tonyperona.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Wright has been the Head of Circulation and Interlibrary Loan at Indiana State University since 2004.

